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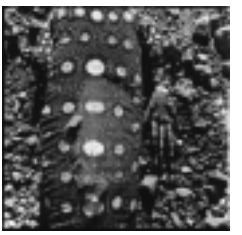

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The substance of consumption

Alchemy, addiction and the commodity

Anne Cronin

Lancaster University, England

ABSTRACT This article reconsiders the category of 'commodity' by exploring its historical and contemporary articulation with the category of 'drug' and the way in which both have been figured as transformative. I argue that ideas of substance, substance-dependency, willpower, structures of feeling and social struggles over power amass or materialize at particular moments in their cultural circulation. They coalesce temporarily into a structure conventionally apprehended as a commodity. Thus, values, norms, ideals and feelings substantialize in the form of the commodity. In turn, our relationship to commodities is called on to substantiate or legitimize a particular framing of our social order and control of social groups structured around 'good commodity-drugs', 'bad drugs' and so-called addictive consumption practices. Through such a framework, I analyse the category of 'commodity' as transformational prism which tracks its complex discursive trajectories through pathology, social order, materiality, willpower and feeling.

KEYWORDS addiction • agency • alchemy • commodity • drug • metamorphosis • patent medicine • structures of feeling

'Merchandise is the opium of the people'
Situationist graffiti, May 1968[1]

How should we understand the conceptual category of 'the commodity'? What are we aiming to account for, explore or challenge when we use this

category? This article attempts to examine these questions by analysing how 'the commodity' has come to be imagined as a transformational category. I analyse how contemporary discursive articulations of the commodity frame ideas of both personal and societal change or metamorphosis (for good or ill). As a focus, I explore the discursive intertwining of the category 'commodity' and that of 'drug', and particularly the key commodity-drug of the 19th century – the patent medicine – and its links with contemporary food supplements and herbal remedies. As I argue in this article, the drug as pivotal transformational commodity distils a central question of consumer culture. As Appadurai (1986: 9) suggests, this question should not be, what is a commodity?, but rather, what sort of an exchange is commodity exchange? Yet I suggest that what we also need to ask of consumer culture is the question, what is *changed* in commodity exchange? Many studies have attended to the ways in which consumer culture provides the raw materials through which the self and identity are transformed or changed, often as part of a project of the self (see, for example, Radner, 1995; Schutzman, 1999). Yet I will argue that 'the commodity' does not merely promise individual metamorphosis or personal transformation of mood, lifestyle or self-identity. First, I argue that the commodity also transforms social and economic relations, embodies and circulates material privilege and inequality, and focuses ideals of social change. Second, I argue that the very notion of transformation or metamorphosis is central to conceptually organizing the category of 'commodity' as it has been used in both historical and contemporary contexts. This sense of the commodity as a transformational prism affecting both individuals' sense of self and societal formations has often been figured as alchemy or as a form of magic. I explore ways of imagining these alchemical transmutations which attend to the complex, involuted relations between substance, commodity and agency that constitute the circulation of objects, power and value in contemporary capitalist society. I argue that it is these accretions of materiality, commodity-status and social power that constitute the discursive weight of the commodity as object. For, as Appadurai (1986) has noted, things have trajectories; they are things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. Things move in and out of commodity status and have biographies and social lives (Kopytoff, 1986). I suggest that the very idea of material substance ('medicine' or 'food') and the idea of an object are not co-extensive – their multiple statuses as materiality and commodity are mediated by discourses of agency and, particularly in relation to the emergent category of 'the drug', by discourses of addiction. In an expansion of Appadurai and Kopytoff's arguments, I suggest that it is not only substances and objects that circulate into and out of the category of 'commodity'. Notions of free will and feeling also constitute this flow of elements that literally make up what we apprehend as a commodity: it is the accretion of these multiple elements of substance, will or agency, and

feeling over time that constitute the category of the commodity. I track these relations through the historically sedimented understandings of 'the drug' and 'the commodity', arguing that the drug is a densely charged discursive category that articulates historically shifting categories of food, medicine, pathology, commodity, social order, agency and identity.

My aim in this article is to explore how the imbricated relation between the drug and the commodity has had a lasting impact on how each are thought in contemporary society. Therefore, in methodological terms and conceptual scope this article should not be considered a history of consumption or a history of medicine. Rather, it briefly sketches out some historical convergences in discourses of values, norms and power which articulate the category of the commodity. I aim to show how the categories 'drug' and 'commodity' operate in historical and contemporary contexts beyond the level of mere analogy or juxtaposition. Following Foucault (2001: 37), I am not looking for 'chains of inference' but rather 'systems of dispersion' – a defining regularity that is a discursive formation. It is within such a formation that the commodity and its relation to the drug circulate discursively and materially. This is not, then, a history of the commodity as such, but an exploration of the discursive constitution of the category 'commodity' over time and how this aggregation of values and power frames our relations to commodities.

In the following section, I explore how ideas of consumption of food, drink and medicinal substances articulated with ideas of health and new consumer goods and practices in 19th-century western consumer society. The definition of the 'substance' of food, drink and medicine and their shifting definition and role as commodities linked in important ways to emergent ideas of individual health and societal prosperity. As such, food, drink and medicine were key commodities in the material development of early consumer economies, and also played a central role in discourses of the nature of consumption, the self, the role of consumption in structuring society, and transformational substances. My concern in the following section is not to provide a detailed history of patent medicines. This is beyond the scope of the article and is well documented elsewhere (see Loeb, 1994; Richards, 1990; Sivulka, 1998). My aim, rather, is to indicate some important discursive convergences between the categories of 'drug' and 'commodity' in 19th and early 20th century Euro-American societies.

Patent medicines: the commodities of no substance?

Patent medicines were highly significant substances in 19th-century consumer society. They were among the first 'standardised, nationally marketed, brand-name products', with their vendors playing a key role in the development of innovatory modes of mass promotion and distribution

(Porter, 1989: 46). The manufacturers of patent medicines pioneered the use of the brand name in the marketing of goods, literally branding with hot irons the wooden boxes containing their products (Sivulka, 1998). They played a pivotal discursive role: patent medicines were key boundary substances in debates about what constituted a food and a medicine, and what constituted legitimate or illicit (and dangerous) 'drugs'. They defined the field of consumerism and framed shifting ideas of volition, regulation, morality and the consuming self. As has often been noted, the advertising of patent medicines was hugely influential in understandings of these substances and their physiological and social effects (for example, Richards, 1990). The significance of such advertising must be seen as indissociable from more general shifts in visual culture, articulating new ideas of the sensuous connections between commodities and images, health and substances of consumption, feelings and objects.[2] Yet I suggest that advertising was only one element in the story of the influence of patent medicines. Crucial to this cultural moment was the articulation of emergent discourses of consumption and health with discourses of drug and alcohol use and their perceived dangers to the social order. Ideas of inebriety and various 'mania' linked to particular substances were rapidly mutating and gaining considerable discursive weight during the 19th century. Maryon McDonald (1994) argues that the imputed addictiveness of any substance (and indeed practice) had a direct relation to its perceived social and moral threat. Rather than simply deducing the pharmacological effects of a particular substance and drawing up regulatory practices on that basis, the regulation of supposedly 'dangerous substances' flowed from specific concerns about shifts in the social order. In the 19th century perceptions of moral and political dangers encouraged the establishment of 'a pharmacology of harm' (McDonald, 1994: 4), in which one key determinant of harm was the association of a substance with particular social groups that were considered to be threatening (Kohn, 1992). In effect, the laws and regulations governing 'dangerous substances' were attempts to govern what were perceived to be dangerous groups, the very realm of freedom (Valverde, 1998), and, I would argue, the realm of consumption.

It is in this context that patent medicines evolved as key commodities. By 1880, patent medicines made up 25 percent of all advertising in Britain and created important revenue for the magazines in which they advertised (Loeb, 1994). Indeed, several key medical journals were underwritten by the revenue created by patent medicine advertising (Richards, 1990). A patent medicine was not restricted to what we would understand today as a 'drug', but could be a device such as an electric belt or artificial eardrums (Richards, 1990). As noted above, patent medicines operated discursively as boundary substances on the faultline between drug, food and medicine. Indeed, half of all patent medicines on sale in Britain in 1908 called themselves either food or drink (Richards, 1990). This is part

of a long discursive trajectory undergone by specific commodities – when tobacco, coffee, cocoa, tea and distilled liquor spread across many European societies in the 16th and 17th centuries, they were initially considered as medicinal agents rather than as food or drink (Matthee, 1995). For instance, sugar had a substance–commodity trajectory in which its uses were defined first as a medicine and spice, later as a preservative, then a beverage sweetener, then as a pastry ingredient, and finally as a food (Mintz, 1993). It was only later that foods and medicines came to be defined in terms we recognize now. For example, Aspirin was originally launched in 1899 as a patent medicine and only later became a widely used 'conventional' medicine (Richards, 1990). In 1915, an American invented a new brand name Vitamin for his cure-all pill in order to distinguish it from myriad other pills offering the same restorative effects (Richards, 1990). Other products that were advertised as patent medicines, such as Kellogg's cornflakes and Heinz ketchup, only later became defined as food (Richards, 1990). Advertising for cocoa emphasized 'the medicinal benefits of "Dietic", "Homeopathic" and "Pulmonic" brands for invalids and children' (Burnett, 1999: 182). An 1892 American print advertisement for Coca-Cola claimed that its product was 'The ideal brain tonic, A delightful Summer and Winter Beverage . . . For Headache and Exhaustion' (Sivulka, 1998: 75). The famous Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was advertised as curing

> all Ovarian troubles, Inflammation and Ulceration, Falling and Displacements, and any consequent Spinal Weakness, and is particularly adapted to the Change of Life. It removes Faintness and Flatulence, destroys the craving for stimulants, and relieves weakness of the stomach. It cures Bloating, Headaches, Nervous Prostration, General Debility, Sleeplessness, Depression and Indigestion . . . For the cure of Kidney Complaints of either sex this Compound is unsurpassed.[3]

Thus patent medicines were hybrid substances which, for commercial purposes, eroded the boundary between medicine and food, drug and non-drug, the moral and the physical, and needs and wants. Indeed, there was no clear dividing line between conventional medicine and patent medicines and many patent medicines were listed as 'official' medicines in medical encyclopaedias (Richards, 1990). There were also explicit links between discourses of 'diseases of the will' (Valverde, 1998) – for example, what we now call addiction – and discourses circulating about patent medicines. For example, 'inebriety' – what we would now understand as alcoholism – was imagined as a hybrid physical/moral condition and this was reflected in the treatments offered as cure. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the *British Journal for Inebriety* had many advertisements for patent medicines such as Bovril, Ovaltine, cocoa drinks and mineral water in which physical weakness was presented as synonymous with weaknesses of the will or

'nerve power'. The advertisements suggested to physicians of the time that these so-called 'nourishing liquids' would build up their patients' 'nerve power' (Loeb, 1994; Valverde, 1998). Ovaltine was advertised as a remedy for 'exhaustion and brain fag' and Coca-Cola was advertised as a cure for 'tiredness, headache, and brain fag' (Valverde, 1998: 62). This was a central concern because lack of nerve power and willpower were seen as encouraging inebriety. Indeed, the cereal Grape Nuts was advertised as an aid to stopping drinking (Valverde, 1998). In early 20th-century America, Sears White Star Secret Liquor Cure was a narcotic-laced patent medicine marketed as a cure for alcohol dependence. Its advertising suggested that a woman could add it surreptitiously to her husband's food or drink, pacifying him and thus diminishing his appetite for drinking alcohol (Holbrook, 1959). Should he then become dependent on the narcotic in the cure, he could buy another patent medicine to cure his previous consumption-induced problem: Sears Cure for the Opium and Morphine Habit (Holbrook, 1959). Other foods and drinks were enlisted in the Temperance battle against alcohol. For example, Ty Phoo Tipps tea was marketed as a patent medicine cure for indigestion and, more generally, tea was lauded by the Temperance movements as a powerful ally against alcohol, 'the demon drink' (Burnett, 1999: 63). Other commodities played on the link between poison and cure more literally: Duffy's Pure Malt Whiskey Company claimed a medicinal status for its whisky, stating that it was endorsed by more than 7000 doctors in America and 'used exclusively in more than 2,000 hospitals' (Holbrook, 1959: 8).

Patent medicines were therefore important substances and prime commodities of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Advertisements for patent medicines emphasized the transformative potential of consumption (Loeb, 1994) and, arguably, positioned these substances as the prototypical modern commodity in ways that intermingled ideas of the drug and the commodity. This raises some challenging questions: Do drugs become acceptable by being framed as commodities? Should we see 'the drug' as the ultimate commodity? And does the commodity function as a drug?

The placebo-drug and the commodity

How then should we imagine the commodity-trajectory between 19th-century patent medicines and contemporary commodities – for example, food supplements, vitamins and minerals? In many contemporary theories of consumerism, individuals are thought to work upon commodities in buying, displaying and using them, and in situating them within their domestic arena, their symbolic universe and their biographical framework (see Miller, 1987). Yet 'the drug' sits uneasily in this schema: discourses of the drug-commodity point to broader concerns about the (dangerous) way

in which *the commodity* is seen to work upon *the consumer* (and society as a whole). By examining the historical links between patent medicines and the evolving discourses of inebriety, mania and addiction and their relation to the shifting categories of alcohol and drugs, it is possible to identify these wider discursive trajectories. As I have outlined, such a perspective highlights the historical and contemporary significance of ideas of 'healthy free will' and the perceived relation between the consumption practices of different social groups and a healthy, stable, social order. In tracing these trajectories, it is crucial to recognize that the articulation between consumption, the commodity and dangerous substances has been a long and complex one. In the 18th century, critics accused the emergent consumer society of creating insatiable cravings for commodities (particularly patent or proprietory medicines). Together with a growing fetishism of goods, health-giving powers came to be 'crystallised, through some imaginative alchemy, into tangible commodities' (Porter, 1989: 41). In parallel, ideas of health, understandings of the desire for objects, and the power of patent and conventional medicines were coalescing in a potent form – the commodity.

> Hypochondria, quackery, and addiction thus formed a vicious circle. Frankenstein-like, the consumer society was giving birth to a new personality type: man the consumer, pained by deprivation and craving commodities. He thus grew addicted to 'consumption'; it was his disease. Sickness, and the response to it through medicines in commodity form, was integral to this process. (Porter, 1989: 43)[4]

The 19th century further focused the relation between the drug and the commodity through the prism of the patent medicine that Thomas Richards sees as the ultimate 'placebo-drug' and prototypical commodity:

> The placebo-drug became the ultimate icon of consumer capitalism; its use and appeal cut across class lines and created the illusion of a consumer democracy; it transformed the body first into a field for advertised commodities, and later into an entity so dependent on them that it had become one in its own right; it reorganised the myth of the consuming subject around the ingestion of quick-fix remedies; it equated abundance with the easy availability of self-transforming substances. . . . In the patent medicine system, the placebo-drug is the ultimate commodity: it has no intrinsic value; it has no use; it has no origin; yet it is so tangible, so palpable, so material, that one can hold it in the palm of one's hand. The placebo is the commodity writ both small and large, for the smaller it shrinks in reality, the greater the number of attributes that can be attached to it. (Richards, 1990: 196–7)

According to Richards, the commodity and the drug were drawn into a relation of material and metaphorical consonance through the patent medicine. Both the drug and the commodity came to be seen as offering immediate gratification while simultaneously stimulating the desire for

renewed gratification; 'In doing so, . . . they have bequeathed to us a lasting emblem of an abundant society that has not yet come to terms with the limits to satisfaction: drugs. Patent medicine, then, began the drugging of England' (Richards, 1990: 203). Although it is clear that the drugging of England began long before this (see Berridge and Edwards, 1987), Porter and Richards point to key connections between emergent discourses of consumer culture and drug culture.

I am arguing that the complex relationships between discourses of the body, social order, morality and practices of consumption came to define what constitutes 'the commodity' and 'the drug'. This sets up a powerful conceptual field through which historical and contemporary understandings of the substance and power of commodities, willpower, agency and identity are filtered. But I am cautious about approaching these phenomena with too broad a conceptual sweep. Just as the discourse of addiction achieved neither internal coherence nor total disciplinary control over the identities of those subjected to them ('alcoholics', 'addicts') (see Valverde, 1998), neither should the commodity be seen to seamlessly organize the conceptual field of either Victorian or contemporary culture. For instance, Richards (1990) sees the placebo-drug as the icon of consumer culture – the ultimate commodity – produced in abundance, sold to anyone who can pay, promising self-transformation, all in a material form that has no real substance. Yet approaches such as that of Richards do not address certain fundamental issues. Thinking of patent medicines or contemporary food supplements or vitamins as placebos or placebo-drugs inscribes an idea of lack at the heart of the conceptual field. Yet it is unclear that these substances or their advertising are 'standing in for' anything. While it is evident that Richards' (1990) aim is precisely to show the lack of substance at the heart of the discourses (and promises) of consumer culture, approaches such as his cannot fully attend to the semiotic-material linkages of bodies, images, substances and power. Furthermore, an analysis which figures an isomorphic relation between the commodity and the drug risks inscribing a self-fulfilling prophecy of dependency or drugged acquiescence in thinking through consuming practices and substances of consumption. In such an understanding, metaphors animistically start setting their own conceptual agendas – this may render the imaginable field of agency co-extensive with the imaginable field of drugs and addiction, thus impoverishing approaches that aim to comprehend agency or willpower. In addition, it is crucial to recognize that discourses of what constitutes 'the drug', 'addiction' and 'the commodity' developed in articulation with one another while also recognizing the danger of collapsing them together. Hence, an approach that temporally or conceptually prioritizes one over the other (drug as prototypical commodity; consumerism as drug) in effect re-fetishizes drug metaphors and gives them undue discursive weight. Drugs, alcohol and

other imputedly dangerous substances have frequently been deployed as explanatory forces in the face of class tension, gender shifts and concerns over racial boundaries as a way of 'expressing profound anxieties about the social order as a whole' (Kohn, 1992: 176). In attributing to consumer culture the force of a drug and explaining consumer behaviour as addiction, what concerns are we expressing? Are we articulating a critique of consumer capitalism as the 'pathology' of contemporary society? Is this both a disease in its own right and a symptom of something else? Like many of the manias and disorders of 19th-century Europe, these tropes hold little diagnostic unity. So while there are risks in thinking through the linkages between consumer culture and addiction, there are also opportunities to rethink theoretical framings of the commodity. What we need, I suggest, is a more nuanced way of understanding the multiple and overlapping trajectories of drugs, of commodities, of addiction and of consumer culture, for there are indeed key links that require analysis. Outlining such an analytic framework in detail is beyond the scope of this article but I would like to suggest a way to begin approaching these questions productively. One obvious place to start is with Marx's writings on the commodity.

'The alchemist's retort of circulation'[5]

In approaches that posit consumer culture as addictive or compulsive, advertising is set up as a prime galvanizing force in the persuasion of individuals and the ideological reproduction of social relations. For instance, Robert Goldman (1992: 2) sees advertising as a 'key social and economic institution in producing and reproducing the material and ideological supremacy of commodity relations'. As I have outlined, Richards (1990) argues that advertising has played a central role in transforming the body into a conceptual field for commodities. In other accounts, patent medicines and contemporary food supplements and vitamins are seen to be rendered powerfully 'magical' by advertising (Falk, 1994, 1996). In many analyses, then, advertising comes to be 'framed', set up as the driving force of consumerism and as '*the* iconographic signifier of multinational capitalism' (Nava, 1997: 34; emphasis in original). This begs the question of the source of advertising's power and, in effect, transfers the fetish quality that Marx once saw as residing in the commodity to the advertisement. Indeed, the risk in some approaches is to overlook the nature of these substances as *commodities*, not merely as objects made magical through the touch of advertising. For advertising is only one element in what Michael Taussig (1992) has called 'the nervous system' of semiotic-corporeal-political interconnections. And I am suggesting that this nervous system is constituted by flows of commodities, images, ideas of volition,

health and addiction and by the transformations in substance, agency and subjectivity articulated in this system. It is precisely this alchemical transmutation that interested Marx in his exploration of the circulation of the commodity into and out of the money-form. In the discussion of Marx that follows, my aim is to show how his conceptual approach figured the category of 'the commodity' as transformative and as a site for transformation on both an individuated and societal level. Labour power was transformed into the materiality of the commodity and, in turn, commodity exchange functioned to transform social relations more generally. My concern is less to explore the specific individual or societal forms these transformations took or might take, but rather to examine how the discursive category of 'commodity' is itself figured and animated by a perception of its transformative potential (both by Marx and by later commentators). It is in this way that the commodity has been framed as alchemical.

As the transformation of base metals into gold, or the transformation of a banal substance into a substance of value, alchemy represented for Marx the essence of consumer culture. Using a metaphor that was to inspire later writers such as Raymond Williams (1980), Marx explored what he saw as the 'magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour' (1990: 169). He saw the capitalist production, circulation and exchange of commodities as a form of 'social metabolism' in which 'nothing is immune from this alchemy' (Marx, 1990: 198, 229). This is an emphasis on the transformational power of commodity relations, which revolves around 'the conversion of things into persons and persons into things' (Marx, 1990: 209). Congealed labour power is transformed into the material substance of the commodity, and the visual aspect of the commodity functions to conceal its social history of previous transformations. In this transmutation, capitalism produces 'the workers as a *commodity*', and in an animistic, magical move, the life inherent in the worker is transferred to the commodity which comes to wield an autonomous power over the worker (Marx, 1992: 324; emphasis in original).

Marx (1990: 199) wrote about what he called the 'metamorphosis of commodities' in an ambiguous and at times apparently contradictory way. For Marx, the materiality of commodities is the very essence of capital because commodities embody the objectified labour of workers. Yet Marx also seems to suggest that commodities are simultaneously 'insubstantial' in a conventional sense, functioning as the medium for the transferral of value between objects and people in exchange-values (Marx, 1978). In other parts of his writing, Marx emphasizes this transferral of value in the creation of the commodity-form as radical transmutation – a kind of molecular shift that alters the very fabric of the substance as 'sensuous thing' such that it becomes an entirely new (al)chemical compound – a commodity:

> It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. . . . (Marx, 1990: 163)

In this schema, money performs the ultimate alchemy – it is 'the absolutely inalienable commodity' as it is 'all other commodities divested of their shape' (Marx, 1990: 205). When a commodity morphs into the money-form, it dissolves and effectively disappears, leaving an intangible sedimentation of its previous life: 'the concluding sale of a commodity thus constitutes an aggregate of the first metamorphoses of other commodities' (Marx, 1990: 206). Yet this is an aggregate that obscures the family tree of commodities which have successively transformed in each moment of exchange and that hides the alchemy which has been performed. This contagious metamorphosis is not merely a substitution of one value for another, one substance for another, but an actual transubstantiation in which each alchemical reaction echoes the last but radically alters the next.

Marx's framework has been criticized for a restrictive view of use-value and an over-emphasis on production to the detriment of consumption (see Baudrillard, 1988; Lee, 1993; Leiss, 1978; Miller, 1987; Slater, 1997). And it is also important to note that while Marx's aims in creating this analytic framework were highly specific, his thoughts have been taken up and used (justifiably) in partial ways by later critics for quite different purposes and used in quite different contexts. It is this legacy that interests me – specifically the way in which Marx's suggestive and at times ambiguous remarks about the commodity as transformative have been deployed and have impacted on contemporary understandings. A return, then, to Marx's suggestive thoughts on the ambiguous status of the commodity may prove useful for tracing how we have arrived at some conceptual dead ends in theorizing the commodity and for imagining new ways of thinking these commodity relations. A reconsideration of the imputed 'magic' of the commodity (epitomized by the 19th-century patent medicine or contemporary vitamin) may productively refocus the analytic emphasis away from a fetishizing of the power of advertising and towards the complexity of the social life of the commodity. This can enable an analysis of how 'economic objects circulate in different *regimes of value* in space and time' (Appadurai, 1986: 4; emphasis in original) and can address how these regimes of value articulate notions of consumer agency, addiction and pathology. If we consider commodities as things-in-motion we can begin to trace their trajectories between the material of the substance, the agency and 'addiction' of the individual, the advertising image and the commodity.

Imagining the commodity

In this section I want to draw together my arguments and offer some thoughts on reimagining the complexity of the commodity as a discursive category. First, I have argued that the commodity has been conceived in both historical and contemporary contexts as a transformational prism. Many contemporary analyses have framed the perceived transformational potential of the commodity primarily in relation to personal or group identity, affective or emotional states or lifestyle. I am suggesting that we need to conceive more broadly the commodity's character as nexus of transformational potential. This should include the commodity's connection to social structures and social relations about which Marx wrote in a suggestive but ambiguous way. The commodity, then, should be imagined as a nexus through which money and labour power are transformationally processed, but should also be imagined as a nexus through which discourses of agency, health, concerns about the social control of certain groups, feeling, morality and many more flow and are transformed. To illustrate, consider the relations between 19th-century patent medicines and contemporary remedies. It is clear that there are some key discursive continuities between the framing of contemporary vitamins, minerals and food supplements and 19th- and early 20th-century patent medicines. On one level, contemporary complementary medicines and practices are rooted in the early 19th-century burgeoning of various movements such as homoeopathy, hydropathy, medical botany and so on (Porter, 1989). On another level, some contemporary food supplements, vitamins and minerals echo the promotional discourses of 19th-century patent medicines almost directly. For instance, a contemporary food supplement called New Era, which is available in Britain, is promoted as a tonic for 'nervous exhaustion and general debility'. Dr Gillian McKeith's Living Food Energy offers 'to maintain immunity, energy, blood, vitality, weight management, nourish the organs, detoxify and maintain molecular cell structure' in an echo of Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound discussed in earlier sections. In a different register, Bach Original Flower Remedies offer 'a positive outlook' rather than a list of specific health benefits; 'when we feel fulfilled, happy and positive we tend to enjoy better health'. There are specific discursive continuities here of transformation, wellbeing and the commodity-drug, indicating that the 19th-century patent medicine has a heritage shared with the contemporary food supplement. But its trajectories through categories of drug, medicine, food, free will and social order have transformed the food supplement into a new alchemical compound/commodity requiring a differently framed analysis. How should we approach this?

In analysing these contemporary alchemies, it is important to recognize that there have been multiple shifts in the understandings of the site or cause of addiction/compulsion which have oscillated between the substance itself,

moral fibre and individual willpower. Yet it is possible that these historically embedded concerns have intensified and expanded in important ways in contemporary culture. The 'maladies of the will' of the 19th- and early 20th centuries identified by Valverde (1998) and others seem to have been transformed into 'epidemics of the will' (Sedgwick, 1994). Sedgwick suggests that the concept of addiction has expanded to encompass an ever-widening range of substances and behaviours such that the site of addiction is seen to be not so much the substance itself (alcohol, tobacco, narcotics and so on), but rather the structure of the individual will. Sedgwick gives the example of discourses of 'food addiction' in which food itself is not seen as the root of addiction – rather, the addiction is thought to lie in the structuring of food intake through the exercise of will. In this way, over-eating, anorexia and bulimia all regulate food intake differently but are all seen, in one framework, as 'food addictions'. The previous discussion of the fluid metamorphosis of the commodity through categories of value, material form, human labour power and exchange is usefully recalled here. Such an understanding highlights the discursive slide between substance, individual will and social structure and flags up their aggregation at certain instances to form specific frameworks of legibility for consuming practices and identities. For instance, Valverde (1998: 51; emphasis in original) argues that, in contemporary society, 'excessive drinking is regarded as somehow *like* being addicted to drugs'. Here, the reference points for addiction or compulsion shift between definitions of specific categories of substance; 'drug', 'alcohol'. But I want to argue that the reference points also etch out trajectories between structures of will (or agency) and substance which place a particular emphasis on *feeling* and discourses of the experiential.

In contemporary western consumer culture, feeling is framed as a key structuring principle through which we experience the work of the commodity upon us and we comprehend ourselves as consuming subjects.[6] Products for giving up smoking are an interesting case in point. Until relatively recently, advertisements for such products in Britain have stressed their ability to supplement or bolster the individual's willpower in order to beat the craving and give up smoking. As such, they fed into historical understandings of a structuring of the will in relation to 'dangerous' substances. Recent advertisements add another register which focuses primarily on *feeling* rather than will. A British print advertisement (in 2000) for Nicotinell lozenges presents us with a mandate to 'feel free'. This is a framing of freedom as the subjective experience of self-control detached from any absolute definition of liberty or restraint. The advertisement speaks to how we might feel about our consuming practices rather than invoking medical or legal benchmarks of what constitutes dependency, addiction or free will. Indeed, Valverde (1998) has noted this trend in relation to the contemporary discourses of Alcoholics Anonymous in which alcoholism comes to be defined not by the amount of alcohol consumed,

but rather by the individual experience of lack of control. In many self-diagnosis questionnaires, drinking (and other behaviours) comes to be seen as problematic only insofar as it is linked to unhealthy or questionable feelings (Valverde, 1998). So, in this model, it is not so much a question of how much you drink, smoke, go shopping and so on, but rather a question of how you feel about it.[7] It is only if you feel guilty or anxious or depressed that this behaviour comes to be seen as a problem. Here, as in the Nicotinell advertisement, the site of addiction is primarily situated in a *structure of feeling*, bracketing out or downplaying the significance of a structuring of the will, or the properties attributed to a substance or practice. Crucially, such a structure of feeling does not merely articulate an individual's emotional or affective response or state in relation to commodities. A structure of feeling forms part of a broader social framing around what are deemed acceptable or unacceptable (consumption) practices.

It was, of course, Raymond Williams (1977: 132) who developed a notion of a structure of feeling as a kind of 'cultural hypothesis' precisely to understand social continuity, structure and change and how they are linked to subjective experience. For Williams, a structure of feeling is not a static, monolithic framework but rather is a structure *in process*; it is a collective, social phenomenon but is experienced as individual. In this way the address of the Nicotinell advertisement can be experienced as individuated, articulating as it does individual, subjective experiences of feeling, willpower and a personal relationship with a particular commodity – cigarettes. Yet, at the same time, the advertisement draws on a broader social backdrop for its discursive coherence and weight. For Williams, then, a structure of feeling is 'the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization' (Williams, 1965: 64). These elements constitute a structure with specific internal relations which are 'at once interlocking and in tension' (Williams, 1977: 132). What is particularly interesting about Williams' approach, and which is less evident in other approaches, is the emphasis on feeling as an integrated experience – integrated with thought, and individual experiences integrated with a broader social structure. For him, a structure of feeling does not set feeling against thought, but rather posits 'thought as felt and feeling as thought' (Williams, 1977: 132). In sum, 'structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available' (Williams, 1977, 133–4; emphasis in original). Williams' suggestive ideas can usefully expand the individual structuring of the experiential in the consumption of the substance-commodity to a wider, collective socio-cultural context. I suggest that by translating the notion of a structure of feeling to a context of the commodity we may begin to approach the 'solution' or accretion produced through the circulation of materiality, values and power that constitutes the commodity. Notions of commodity

culture and its relation to 'the drug' have been too hastily 'precipitated' in many studies, conceptually separating the two where their symbiosis should be examined more thoroughly and elsewhere conflating them where their particularities and incommensurabilities need to be more closely explored. Understandings produced through a notion of a structure of feeling may add a key dimension to analyses of the structuring of the will, the properties of a commodity and commodity-drug, and thus may point to the complexity of the discursive interactions between will, substance, feeling and power relations.[8] It is through such an approach that I propose we can revisit the enigmatic commodity offered to us by Marx; 'that quirky flickering unity formed by thingification and spectrality' (Taussig, 1992: 4).

Alongside the idea of the commodity as a transformational discursive category, I would also argue for a more nuanced understanding of both the historical cohesion and fracturing of the category 'commodity'. In my example of the 19th-century patent medicine and its relation to the contemporary food supplement and vitamin, I have indicated important historical connections in their discursive articulation through ideas of 'drug', health, social order and feeling. Yet I have also argued that there are complexities, contradictions and hidden histories in the commodity–drug nexus and the materiality–value nexus to which approaches such as that of Richards (1990) do not do justice. The magic or alchemy of commodities is not best understood as a manipulation of desire or lack in the consuming subject through 'the placebo-drug' that is the commodity, nor as purely an effect of advertising. In the semiotic-material aggregate of the commodity, the values that constitute the commodity have not merely been substituted one for another in their series of metamorphoses. Nor have they simply been transferred between one specific commodity and another by advertising. Instead, I have argued, this alchemy derives from the fact that change and transformation are central in conceptually organizing the category of the commodity: substance, discourses of will, structures of feeling and struggles over social power amass or materialize at particular moments of circulation, coalescing temporarily into a structure conventionally apprehended as a commodity. Values, norms, ideals, and feelings substantialize in the form of the commodity. In turn, our relationship to commodities is called on to substantiate or legitimize a particular framing of our social order and control of social groups structured around 'good commodity-drugs', 'bad drugs', and so-called addictive consumption practices such as 'shopaholism'. This aggregation of values and materialities should not be understood as the result of an additive process in which the distinct elements sediment in segregated layers which can be isolated. This amassing of values and materialities to form the commodity should rather be imagined as a process in which each element reacts with the others, effecting a radical transmutation. In this way, a 19th-century patent medicine has important discursive connections with the contemporary food supplement. Yet, the

ways in which those commodities have tracked through the categories of drug, medicine, food, free will and social order have transformed the food supplement into a new alchemical compound/commodity. At any one cultural moment, then, commodities form a precipitate and thus render legible a structure of feeling. But they also obscure the paths that those commodities (and the values and feelings that make up a commodity) have taken to arrive at that point of legibility.

To begin to precipitate and hence apprehend the structure of feeling that articulates the commodity, the drug, and notions of agency, I propose a more nuanced exploration of the alchemy of the commodity. This would involve an invocation of the multiple trajectories or social histories of the commodity. It would call on all the previous metamorphoses that Marx saw as constituting commodity exchange in their circuitous routes through the money-form, other commodities and social relations of exchange. It would conjure up the relation between the shifting category of 'the commodity' to geo-economic circuits of trade and their relations to colonialism and slavery (see Sheller, forthcoming). In western society, our everyday, socially sanctioned commodity-drugs such as coffee, sugar, chocolate and tobacco embody contemporary trade inequalities, but are also freighted down with the semiotic-material weight of exploitative histories – many bodies form the body of the commodity. Concretely, then, such an analysis could be used to rethink contemporary manifestations of such complex trajectories – for example, in analysing what are often called 'anti-capitalist' or 'anti-globalization' groups and their targeting of the commodity and the brand as embodiments of capital and capitalist values. Or, for instance, such a framework could explore the relations between 'black market' commodities of illegal drugs such as heroin and their transformative relationship to the circulation of legal commodity-drugs such as alcohol.

I am also suggesting that this alchemical analysis would invoke not only the commodity's transmutations into and out of the money-form through the bodies of other commodities. It would also sketch out the commodity's trajectories through structures of will, structures of feeling and ideas of addiction and agency, transforming those categories in turn. Such an analysis could, for example, more subtly examine the gendering of so-called 'addictive' or 'pathological' consumer practices such as 'shopaholism', exploring how 'the commodity' operates as a site of interconnections between modes of social control, individual feelings of pleasure or anxiety, and individual experiences of agency or its loss. My proposed alchemical analysis would thus show how our relation to commodities and our understandings of consumption practices are always, among many other things, a management of anteriority – our relation to commodities rehearses historically embedded ideals, values and inequalities which are in turn transformed in each of the commodity's transmutations across the money-form, other commodities and cultural values. Part of the alchemy of the

commodity is precisely the way in which it works on or manages us, even if we are unaware of the commodity's historical mandate and even if we do not register the privilege that some of us have accrued in our relations with the commodity. As I have suggested in the section on the social stratification of the free will, such an approach would also position the social differences of gender, race and class as central organizing principles in an analysis of the commodity rather than as particularisms in the general academic field of consumption.

In the 'nervous system' that constitutes society's semiotic-corporeal-political interrelations, substance, will and feeling are connecting and disconnecting in complex ways in their articulations with ideas of health, addiction and social order. In petitioning the commodity to give up its alchemical secrets, we may begin to apprehend the relations of power and substance in new ways and to begin to understand more fully our dependent relation to the commodity.

Notes

1 Cited in Richards (1990: xv).
2 Although advertising is highly significant in defining what constitutes a commodity, I am not focusing primarily on advertising or visual culture in this article. For my views on the significance of advertising, see Cronin (2000).
3 A collection of patent medicine advertising can be accessed at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, USA. Accessed 23 October 2000. http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/biolib/hc/nostrums/lydia2.html
4 The masculine gendering of Porter's consumer requires some qualification. See Bowlby (1985, 1993) for a discussion of the historical development of gendered discourses of consumerism and pathology.
5 Marx (1990: 208).
6 The channelling or structuring of feeling by advertising is not a contemporary innovation. Jackson Lears (1983) charts the emergence of a 'therapeutic culture' mediated by advertising which is precisely concerned with manipulating feeling rather than presenting information. I am arguing that what is significant in contemporary advertising is the articulation of this structuring of feeling with a structuring of the will, and a concern over addiction in a newly expanded sense.
7 Such discourses also explore how your feelings may motivate your addictive practices. The rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups has been extensively analysed elsewhere – for example, see Rice (1996).
8 Although this has not been the prime focus of this article, the concept of structures of feeling may begin to apprehend the complex self-understandings and experiential aspect of individuals' consumption patterns framed

through discourses of addiction, health, will and the power of the commodity. The commodity here functions as a transformational prism, filtering a structure of feeling that is 'at the very edge of semantic availability' (Williams, 1977: 134).

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● **ANNE CRONIN** is a lecturer in the Institute for Cultural Research and the Sociology Department at Lancaster University, UK. Her recent book is *Advertising and Consumer Citizenship: Gender, Images and Rights* (Routledge, 2000). *Address*: Institute for Cultural Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, UK.
[email: a.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk] ●